HYBRID "I"

Tisa Bryant, Anelise Chen, Chris Kraus, and Q.M. Zhang in conversation

"My questions are what structure the book, not events."
- Christa Wolf*

In the explication of subjective truth through disclosure, modern literature has been enriched by ad hoc fusions of disparate forms. In 1936, George Santayana described the "emotions" of his life experiences in *The Last Puritan: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel.* Gore Vidal—who favored thinking over feeling—answered that subtitle thirty-five years later with his roman à clef *Two Sisters: A Novel in the Form of a Memoir*. Throughout the 1970s and '80s, writers as varied as Lillian Hellman, Truman Capote, Hunter Thompson, and Marguerite Duras published work that—acknowledged by its author or not—combined memoir and reporting with the fictive.|1|

In her essays on Eileen Myles' "Everyday Barf," New Narrative innovator Dodie Bellamy celebrates a text where "the personal intersects content intersects form intersects politics."|2| Today, a new generation—inspired by Chris Kraus' novel *I Love Dick* (1997)—continues to ignore boundaries, pushing a "radical subjectivity" through an overlap of theory, fact, and fiction. At a university panel last year on literary hybridity, Chris joined Tisa Bryant (author of *Unexplained Presence*, published by in 2007 by Leon Works), Anelise Chen (*So Many Olympic Exertions*, 2017, Kaya Press), and Q.M. Zhang (*Accomplice to Memory*, 2017, Kaya Press) for a conversation about their work. *B.P.*

CHRIS KRAUS It strikes me how normalized this form we're calling "hybrid" has become. Anelise, your book seems like a contemporary novel—funny, kind of disjunctive, but really well written. Your book, Kim [Q.M.], is an ideal version of doing history. It's a family history, but it also seems like a paradigm of how one would *do* history. Because of your father's kind of faulty memory and idiosyncrasies, you have to constantly question the veracity of it, and that means questioning the veracity of memory itself. And when you question memory, you question everything.

And Tisa, your book of amazing essays is so well researched and well written and felt—they seem like perfect literary essays. So, where's the hybridity?

ANELISE CHEN Is it only a hybrid text if it's very strange and weird and incomprehensible? [LAUGHS]

TISA BRYANT I've been thinking about that too. I saw a call for the "Best American Experimental Writing," and it said something like, "Bring us your weirdest, your wildest writing." And I thought, *Is that it?* There's always grace, there's always stealth, there's always nuance, there's always structural intervention. One might not always notice what literary forms are being manipulated until you get uncomfortable with your expectations not being met. The tag on the book says one thing, but your experience of what you're reading is doing something else.

Q.M. ZHANG I think the interesting thing is that we've all said our books started out as one thing and turned into something else, and maybe again into something else. There's something organic, maybe even necessary about the forms that the books took. My book started out the way Chris described it. Initially, I thought I was doing family history, recognizing the limitations of memory. I had been interviewing my father for years, documenting his words, checking them out against historical sources, and trying to build that all together—thinking I was doing this thing called "family history." But when my father, at the end of his life, opened a secret, he basically pulled a rug out from under everything I thought I knew. I discovered that much of what I thought

* Epigraph: Christa Wolf in conversation with Aafke Steenhuis, in Wolf, *Im Dialog: Aktuelle Texte* (Munich: Luchterhand, 1990).

|1| In 1980, after Lillian Hellman's three volumes of memoirs had been published, Mary McCarthy went on the *Dick Cavett Show* and told a nationwide television audience that "Every word [Hellman] writes is a lie, including 'and' and 'the.'" Hellman sued for defamation, and the case dragged on until her death in 1984, when her executors dropped the suit. The fact that Hellman was a former Stalinist and McCarthy a supporter of Trotsky contributed to their mutual enmity. Also see Truman Capote's *Music for Chameleons* (1980), Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972), and Marguerite Duras' *La douleur* (1985).

|2| Dodie Bellamy, "Barf Manifesto" (2009), in *When the Sick Rule the World* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2015), 45. The piece originated as a Modern Language Association paper "MLA Barf" (2007) and its sequel, the California College of the Arts lecture "CCA Barf."

I knew was, in fact, lies. Outright, blatant lies. And that's when I turned to fiction. Because I felt like there was no other way I was going to be able to enter my father's world.

But then I had to make another move. I decided that fiction alone couldn't grapple with the problem of truth telling, and I needed to move between these forms in order to engage the reader with the problem. I had to dive into different forms of writing and experiment. And I found that very liberating. I would take fiction workshops, I would take memoir workshops. It's the problem of memory, but it's also the problem of knowing *anybody*, much less your own father. And that's when I decided to very deliberately and intentionally move between memoir-like, first-person writing about a father and daughter meeting in a hospital, and these pieces which are fictive—wholly my imagination. And there are the documentary photographs, which, originally, I was using as some kind of "proof." I was looking at these historical images, thinking I was seeing something about the past. But in the end they became catalysts for my imagination.

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CHRIS Maybe hybridity also has something to do with tenacity—a commitment to the material. The more you stay with the material, the more it tells you the form it needs to be. You might get it wrong the first time, but if you commit to the material, it will actually speak.

ANELISE The book was really hard to write; it took me four or five years. I've always wanted to be a writer, and I thought that by the time I'm thirty I'm going to have this book, so I really drove myself. [At first] I tried very earnestly to write a novel-novel [LAUGHS], with scenes and progression and epiphanies. And I remember I had an actual physical feeling of nausea. I'd say to myself, "I've got to write this scene," and I'd write it and feel so disgusted. I used to be an athlete, so I pretended I was in training. I would wake up, and it was very routine and very boring and very mundane. Completely about self-abnegation and delaying pleasure for later. [LAUGHS] The process of that was so painful and I don't recommend it at all. Don't go into it thinking you're an athlete in training [LAUGHS]. You have to bring elements of joy into your life.

So I forced myself to write a different kind of novel. Eventually I settled on this form that's very fragmentary. We were talking about the aftermath of grief and how your mind works—you start collecting material. I always picture it like a bird's nest. You're collecting material, and that's all you can really do for the time being. It's a different kind of looking, and it's not exactly narrative-making. The novel-novel, the traditional narrative, is about time passing. When you're in that moment of grief, you're very much rooted in the present because you're so caught up in the experience of pain. The experience of time is different. So I eventually settled on this fragmentary, notebook form. The form became about incompleteness, about not being able to finish thoughts, about not being able to make connections. It was hard to find that form. [LAUGHS]

TISA It's funny. I was doing all of this archival research to write

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- *Chris Kraus*

something like a historical novel. It was kind of based on a joke. I used to watch a lot of soap operas when I was in high school, and I always marveled at how the producers could always swap out an actor or actress. "I need to get another one, so the role of Rachel is now played by..." [LAUGHS] And you'd have to deal with the specter of the old Rachel, and then you'd move into the new Rachel. You'd forget about the old Rachel, who would show up on another show. There was something about that that really fascinated me. One day I was at a party, and all of these women showed up after a marathon of watching *Pride and Prejudice*, affecting these British accents. One woman was Asian, one was black, one was biracial, one Latina, and one was a redhead. They were all doing these accents, and we were leaning back and giggling. And then I thought, there's actually nothing absurd about this array of women inhabiting this space of the marriage-plot novel. The only thing was, they're not represented [in Austen's novel]—they were all subjects of the British crown in different ways. There's the historical connection; we just don't have the visual analog for it. So wouldn't it be funny to swap out the lead heroine for a woman of color? There were all these different problems I encountered with how to let and not let the reader know that this swap had occurred—who would know, who would perceive it,

"Maybe when you're writing a hybrid text, you can't really envision the reader."
- Anelise Chen

and who wouldn't? When would the role just be the role, and when would there be a cultural or racial specificity to how that role was being played? And then it went bananas from there, because I found myself caught up in questions of fidelity, and doing right by a black female figure within this historical, colonial, slave-era narrative. And my editor hated what I was doing, because it was very novel-novel. Meanwhile, I was watching a lot of movies. It occurred to me that I didn't need to reinvent in a novel the situation I was describing that occurred constantly in film, in visual art, and in literature. All I needed to do was to pull it forward. So I amassed all of these essays, and the fiction part of it was in speculating on these characters' subjectivity. And also not keeping a fidelity with the research sources. I would watch these movies and then write out the entire narrative from memory. So I'd get a lot of things wrong. When memory enters, so does fiction. And I refused to correct what I had done, because I liked my version better. There's a combination of speculative fiction and the essay by way of literary criticism, where I'm standing at the edge of a screen or a text, pointing out things—a possible narrative that wasn't the intention of the maker of the source material. And I just enjoyed it, and let it go.

What about you, Chris? I watched a video of you talking about *I Love Dick*, and how the form of the letters [that make up much of the book] gave you a vehicle to write about art.

CHRIS I had that problem people have when they're starting to write: not knowing how to write. [LAUGHS] What is my subject matter, and what is my presence within the text? And if I say "I," then who is this "I"? I would try to keep a diary, and always failed because I would get so self-conscious about the "I." But when you're writing a letter, you say "I" all the time—you're not thinking about it, you're thinking about the other person. So the relational thing became like acting, where how you being what you say has a lot to do with who you're talking to. And that dictates everything.

ANELISE Maybe "audience" is a [factor in hybridity]. There's an obvious recipient of the letters [in *I Love Dick*]. Maybe when you're writing a hybrid text, you can't really envision the reader. Halfway through *I Love Dick*, did you say, "I have to make this more an epistolary novel," or did you try to shape it more?

CHRIS I wrote all the letters not knowing I was writing a novel. It was completely straight up—I was really writing to Dick. But at a certain point I realized that I had written a book, and when I went back to compose it as a book, it was very different. That's when I added the third-person stuff. I thought, okay, this is like an eighteenth-century sex comedy set in the twentieth-century art world. [LAUGHS]

It took me five years to write my third novel *Torpor*. People say *I Love Dick* is so personal, but it doesn't feel that way to me. *Torpor* was really personal, so I wrote it in the third person. It was too personal to say "I," but it was so painful to work on. It started as these little paragraphs—short prose-poem type things. I had a notebook full of them, but I didn't want to publish a book like that. So the next part of it was to find links between some of them. I started to write bridges; some of them would join up and become longer. But that's a very, very slow process. There were several wrong moves in terms of making it work as a book. It wasn't until the last draft when I realized—actually Sylvère [Lotringer] told me—it's a road trip.[3] You're trying to move forward, but you have to keep flashing back. And that became the key. I talk about this tense in the book, the tense of trauma, *futur antérieur* in French—"it would have been." As soon as you say those words, you want to cry. It's like this effort to move forward, but something is holding you back. The whole arc of the narrative became like that.

ANELISE I eventually settled on a road trip narrative. You have to keep the character physically moving, even though you have flashbacks. After five years, did you encounter this problem where your feelings about yourself are changing, your ideas about the past are changing, and whatever you've put down is always changing? Did you have to freeze it in time in order to tell the story?

CHRIS Yeah. Especially if you're writing with lived material, the first thing you have to say at the start is, "it stops here." Otherwise you'll be writing this book forever, and you'll have this mentally ill person, this graphomania [LAUGHS].

TISA That's why I don't believe in writer's block. I believe in avoidance [LAUGHS], but that's not a block. Most of the people I know who say they have writer's block, it's not that they're not writing, it's that they're not satisfied with what they're writing. To me, that's really different. I hoard my work. I sit on it, and I have really unrealistic expectations about it. I'm in competition with the future [LAUGHS], which is nowhere. I mean, *don't*. [LAUGHS] It yields absolutely nothing.

[3] In *Torpor* (2006), "Sylvie" and "Jerome" are based on Chris Kraus and Semiotext(e) founding editor Sylvère Lotringer, who were married to one another during the novel's time frame. Kraus' most recent books are *After Kathy Acker: A Literary Biography* (2017), and *Social Practices* (2018), a collection of essays, stories, and conversations.

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CHRIS Another thing that the four of our works may have in common is that, one way or another, we're all very present in the text—writers of the novel-novel seek to disappear, and submerge themselves in the background.

Q.M. The way that this panel was advertised was that we were mixing fact and fiction in order to claim "radical subjectivity." And when I first read that, to be honest, I didn't get it. [LAUGHS] That's not why I was mixing fact and fiction, and that's not how I was thinking about hybridity. But then, after I read all of your books, it forced me to rethink my book, and I think I get it now. [LAUGHS] There's an absence, or an erasure, that we're all dealing with. And the only way to get to that is this kind of radical reflexivity that we're all doing. We're all being really empirical about our own lives, and drawing on that. So I think I understand now that my book is not about my father, but about me finally being able to claim that power of imagination to write him as a fictive character. I didn't understand that until I put my book in conversation with all of yours, and I appreciate that.

TISA Yeah, I think we're all in conversation with so many writers who precede us. When I read back to writers from the 1970s, and certainly the '80s, on presses that don't exist anymore, [I realize that] these are gestures not just of radical subjectivity, but women-of-color feminism. There were so many women who were, by necessity and urgency, creating forms for what they had to say. Oftentimes, when we read people like June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, Gloria Anzaldúa, Maxine Hong Kingston—and not the books of hers that everyone talks about—there are so many people whose messages have been so firmly clutched and repeated at the expense of their formal innovations to bring that message out to us. Looking back at Monique Wittig [for example], I think the Euro-American traditions of the '70s and '80s for women are a lot more accessible. But for women of color, looking at these radical subjectivities and formal innovations, it gets buried. It's really important to point out that they were working across registers and forms and ways that continue to surprise me thirty, forty years later.

CHRIS That is so true. When there's work with content that's disturbing to people, the content is discussed completely at the expense of the formal innovation of the work. That was the story of female artists in the 1970s and '80s too. They were all lumped together as feminists, and no one was really dealing with their work.

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